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ABSTRACT

Schooling for young adolescents (middle grade education) is the weakest link in the chain of public education. Young adolescents pose a unique problem for educators. The central characteristic of this age group is its diversity, resulting from extreme variations in the rates of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Strong administrative leadership and teachers specifically trained to teach adolescents do not exist at the middle school level as they do at the elementary and high school levels. Special attention needs to be given to curricula and counseling for adolescents. Schools should encourage diversity, insist upon excellence, guarantee basic skills without reducing curricula to reading and writing, and meet the needs of adolescents without pitting them against other age groups. (Author/JN)

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INTERMEDIATE SCHOOLING: DECISIONS FOR THE 1980'S

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Early adolescence is a time during which life-changing growth occurs. It is a time when young people begin to define themselves as social beings with a sense of commitment to their personal futures and their society. It is a time to begin considering how to function on one's own. It is a time for establishing a firm sense of racial identity and for sorting through feelings about sexual identity. It is a time when the capacity for hypothetical, abstract thought begins to develop. Physically, it is a time of the most rapid growth and change in the entire human experience. It is, in other words, a critical time of development that can determine the quality of one's future.

Schooling for young adolescents--middle grade education--is the weakest link in the chain of public education. It is the misfortune of young adolescents that just at the point in their lives when they are seeking definition, two areas of confusion and ignorance converge: confusion about the purposes of schooling for young adolescents and ignorance about early adolescence as a critical developmental stage in the life span.[1] The convergence of these two areas of confusion and ignorance--what a school for young adolescents should do and what a young adolescent should be--dangerously undermines the day-to-day functioning of our schools.

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In the senior high years we will continue to reap the bitter harvest of our neglect of middle grade schooling if we do not focus our attention on these formative years.

It is at the very least cost-ineffective to spend considerable amounts of money on the very young without following through to make good on our investment. Likewise, it is an inefficient use of our public monies to concentrate on remediation and re-education at the time of transition into the labor market while failing to support necessary programs in the middle grades that could reduce the need for later widespread remediation. We attend to inputs and outputs. Where is the middle?

We are desperately in need of priority setting, research, program definition, and funding for this age group.

Where do young adolescents go to school? These 12 to 15 or 10 to 15-year-olds are placed predominantly in junior high schools but increasingly in middle schools. The distinction between junior high and middle schools is often meaningless. For instance, in 1978 the state of New York had 236 public middle schools, defined as grades 5-7, 6-8, or 5-8, and 417 public junior high schools, defined as schools with grades no lower than sixth or higher than ninth, except for those with grades 6-8 (which are middle schools)![2] Information like this about where adolescents go to school is just about useless and is the rule, not the exception. In North Carolina in 1976, 12 to 15-year-olds were in schools with 26 different grade configurations (K-8, 6-8, 7-9, 7-10, 7-8, etc.). There is no consensus about where young adolescents should be in school, much less about what the schools should be doing. It is an age group waiting for social attention.

Teacher education for this age group is in a state of flux, if not chaos. In 1968 only two states required teacher certification standards for middle schools. In 1978, 27 states had established or were in the process of establishing certification standards for middle school personnel. Special middle school

certification , as of 1978, was granted in 15 states. Only one state (Kentucky) issued special certification for middle school administrators. (Nine states are working toward special certification, so these numbers will rise.) Even in states with special middle school certification, teachers with elementary certification are allowed to teach grades 5 and 6 in middle schools and teachers with secondary certification may teach grades 7 and 8.[3]

There is no other level of public education for minors that is so poorly defined and that so obviously needs more extensive and careful policy setting. It will be necessary in the 1980's to examine on what basis decisions are made about grade organization and on what basis they should be made. There appears to be a movement toward closing down junior high schools and opening middle schools. Such decisions are usually made for demographic and fiscal reasons, without concern for the developmental claims that young adolescents make upon us. As Michael Timpane says:

> The intellectual chaos surrounding the institutions of intermediate schooling (junior highs and middle schools) is in the United States complete and unique enough to call for a separate intensive nationwide review of their purposes. For these schools more than any other, the physiological and psychological assumptions concerning students' attributes have changed. In both curricula and personnel, they have been colonized by the senior high school mentality. They have taken little or no account of the changing nature of the antecedent elementary instruction of their students. And they are most vulnerable politically to consolidation or the realignment of grade structures. If we are going to eliminate them, at least we should know why. If we are to retain them, we must start over again in deciding what role they should play in the transition of adolescents from elementary schools which have developed much more flexible educational programs to senior highs where, we assume, the nature of experience and instruction will be changing substantially.[4]

In the intensive nationwide review that Timpane recommends, it would be incumbent upon us to make sure we are looking at every pressing educational issue as it impinges on this age group. For instance, the great majority of studies on school desegregation, effective school reading programs, programs for the handicapped, and teacher characteristics ignore or gloss over the middle grades, despite the

fact that we cannot assume that what works at the elementary or senior high levels is effective in schools for young adolescents. In the 1980's we will have to examine the impact of each of these issues on intermediate schooling.

Does it matter what we do? In fact, we know very little, but what we do know gives us some hints. For instance, NIE's Safe School Study tells us that boys in the seventh grade are the most victimized of our students--if they are in junior high schools (7-9), but not in K-8 or middle schools.[5] Eighty-one percent of 7th graders in K-8 schools, in a controlled longitudinal study, participated in extra-curricular activities; 39% of 7th graders did in 7-9 schools, despite the greater number of activities offered.[6] A large urban study found that 12-year-olds who had entered junior high school had lower self-esteem, higher self-consciousness, and greater instability of self-image than 12-year-olds in elementary school. The transition into junior high school is apparently more stressful than other school transitions are.[7] There are other studies that indicate different effects for whites and blacks, and for girls and boys. A good deal more study is needed before this information will be of much use to policy-setters.

With rates of pregnancy, suicide, serious crimes, running away, truancy and alcohol abuse increasing among this age group, we have indication of considerable distress among approximately 20% of this age group. We do not know what role school structure plays in this distress (although in some parts of the country, the crime rate goes <u>down</u> during the summer months and <u>up</u> during the school months), nor do we know which alternative structures will relieve some of this expensive human suffering. We have the greatest number of alternative schools at the senior high school level and many at the elementary level. Unfortunately, we have very few alternatives at the intermediate level. As a result, we offer very little respite to young adolescents who need different school environments. Also, because of this lack of alternatives we have had almost no opportunities to learn about intermediate schooling options. In the 1980's we will need to establish and study

at least as wide a spectrum of alternatives for middle grade schooling as is available for elementary and senior high levels.

At the same time, we must insist upon the normalcy of early adolescence. The onset of puberty, with all its attending physical and behavorial changes, is all too often seen as a pathological time in life during which adults feel that all they can do is to wait it out. In fact, for the large majority this is not a time of crisis and tumultuous acting out. By assuming that it is and putting young adolescents "on hold," we fail to define what makes sense for them just at the point in their lives when they are actively seeking definition from adults. While we must be concerned about establishing alternatives to traditional schooling for the 20% or so who are distressed, we must also be concerned about establishing a spectrum of educational opportunities for the approximately 80% who are coping adequately. As Heyneman and Daniels point out:

> When it comes to legislation in the area of youth, somehow normalcy or the "developmental view" really has no lobby at all. The delinquency people have a lobby. The runaway people have a lobby, the service people and the adolescent pregnancy people all have lobbies... The central concern of these "problem lobbies" is, by definition, to solve a problem. But their particular problem, though serious, may in fact involve a very small portion of young people. By comparison, the processes of socializing the young, a problem which affects everyone, go comparatively unattended and unrepresented.[8]

In the 1980's we will need to reverse this trend and spend a greater amount of our human and financial resources on socializing and educating the young adolescents in our schools.

Young adolescents pose a unique problem for educators. The central characteristic of this age group is its diversity, caused by extreme variations in the rates of physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. There is no age group that is as variable in the entire continuum of schooling. John Money has pointed out that "it is very difficult for some youngsters to be caught in that no-man's land between their chronological age and their physique age, trying to keep up their social age, their academic age, their personality age, and their psychosexual

age, in conformity with their chronological age."[9] It is also very difficult to be a teacher of 25 or 45 such students, each juggling so many different and varying ages, especially since variability occurs both within each individual and among the many individuals in the class. Certainly it is also very difficult to administer a school for this age group or to be on a school board setting policy for such a school. If for no other reason than the fact of this unique variability, intermediate schooling is in need of our targeted attention. Policies and techniques that are effective with other age groups are defeated daily by this one central fact of intermediate school life: variability. And so, we must look at each educational issue as it relates specifically to the developmental characteristics this age group.

One area demanding immediate attention is the search for effective schools. What works? We desperately need such information in reference to schools for 10 to 15-year-olds.

In a very modest definition of "effectiveness," Edmonds and Frederiksen have looked for schools that teach poor and/or minority children how to read and compute. An effective school, using their criterion, is one that is at or above the city average grade equivalent in math and reading.[10] Unfortunately, middle grade education is not part of this search. Similarly, the frequently cited study by Weber on schools that successfully teach reading was conducted only in the primary grades.[11] The studies that have been given four-star ratings in the press tell us very little about what we need to know. At the insistence of the Chief State School Officers, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for instance, was specifically designed so that we cannot draw any conclusions about the effectiveness of individual schools. The Coleman Report determined the influences of school resources on students <u>after</u> controlling for social background characteristics. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education points out that school factors have greater impact on the achievement of minority group students

than on majority students. Coleman's methodology washed out these effects. Even so, according to the Coleman data, teacher quality is a major determinant of scholastic achievement among black students.[12]

What we are so badly in need of getting are studies that tell us about specific programmatic and policy effects for pupils of differing family and social backgrounds at the intermediate level. If, as more and more people are suggesting, we must concentrate on individual schools as the unit of change,[13] then we must know more about the effectiveness of individual schools that serve 10 to 15-year-olds.

There are studies that point the way. For instance, Michael Rutter and his colleagues studied 645,000 students in more than 4,000 schools in London. They were less interested in whether schools lessened gaps in IQ or income inequality, our standard definitions of "effectiveness," than in whether schools have an effect on outcomes like school behavior, delinquency, and passing specific required exams. They found that schools make an enormous difference in achievement and patterns of delinquency.[14] We are desperately in need of such information in the United States.

What makes a school effective in not just desegregating but in integrating its student body? There are several studies that present us with disturbing preliminary data about the difficulties of integration at the junior high school level.[15] We need more help from studies like Classrooms and Corridors: The Crisis of Authority in Desegregated Secondary Schools, which analyzes the strikingly different life in two desegregated junior high schools, one that is in chaos and the other where students learn peacefully in a well administered setting with teachers whose morale is high.[16]

To be effective, a school must establish a climate in which children can learn. As concern about school safety grows, especially at the junior high level, we need to examine not just troubled schools but, even more importantly, orderly

schools. Orderly Schools That Serve Children, a report from the Citizens Council for Ohio Schools, is a first step in the right direction.[17] As we enter the 1980's, we need more examples of schools where young adolescents are learning so that we can learn from their example.

Study after study has told us that effective schools are marked by strong administrative leadership. We do not have as talented a pool of administrators at the middle grade level as we do at other levels. If we are going to strengthen the weakest link, we will need a new form of Educational Professional Development Assistance (EPDA), this time one that focuses strongly on middle grade administrators and staff.

There are curricular issues that must be resolved in relation to intermediate schooling. They have their origin in developmental phenomena at early adolescence. These areas include reading, health education, vocational education, and career education. One example, and an extremely important one, has to do with mathematics and science.

For some students the decision not to continue taking mathematics occurs as early as seventh grade, when eighth grade algebra becomes optional. This decision carries serious negative consequences, since the "mathematics filter" prevents these students from getting later learning in technical fields. All fields entailing the use of mathematics, including those relying on computer technology, are closed to these young people because of a decision made during early adolescence. This problem is especially acute among women and minorities.[18]

The United States government is spending millions of dollars on equity programs in order to provide equal opportunities for women and minorities in and through public schooling. Special attention needs to be devoted to curricula and counseling for young adolescents. Mathematics and science are only two examples from among many badly in need of help.

The challenges for the 1980's are new because they take place in an atmosphere of discouragement about change. We will need to encourage diversity without encouraging segregation,[19] insist upon excellence without becoming elitist, guarantee basic skills without reducing curricula to reading and writing, and meet the needs of young adolescents without pitting them against other age groups. Most of all, we need to insist, as does the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, that even though education cannot overcome the impact of slums, that even though we need welfare reform, housing policies, health and other social programs, school (and employment) policies "can make a significant difference, as is suggested by examples of promising programs in certain communities."[20] We must learn about those programs and from them so that we foster the healthy development of our young adolescent population.

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